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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 SAN JOSE 000596

SIPDIS  
SENSITIVE

DEPT FOR WHA/CEN, WHA/PPC, INL/LP, AND PM; OSD FOR POLICY;  
SOUTHCOM ALSO FOR FPA

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PREL MASS MCAP PINS SNAR CS

SUBJECT: ONE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL: ENDURING FRIENDSHIP  
BOATS ARE NOT THE BEST SOLUTION FOR COSTA RICA

REF: A. 07 SAN JOSE 2074

- 1B. SAN JOSE 586
- 1C. SAN JOSE 530
- 1D. SAN JOSE 400
- 1E. SAN JOSE 63

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Post appreciates Department's and other agency's hard work to secure Merida Initiative funding for Costa Rica. However, we do not/not recommend the purchase of Enduring Friendship (EF) vessels for Costa Rica. We understand there is a short deadline to develop the spending plan required by Congress, but a hasty decision that appears expedient in the short run may not prove effective over the longer run. We therefore ask that our views be given serious consideration during inter-agency review of the Merida package for Central America. Our reasons are as follows:

-- A U.S. Coast Guard survey in March 2008 reported that EF vessels were not an appropriate platform to conduct primary Costa Rican Coast Guard (SNGC) missions, such as counternarcotics operations;

-- Our Office of Defense Representative (ODR), has consistently reported the difficulties experienced by other countries' EF boats in the region, especially their fairly sophisticated, maintenance-intensive nature. Moreover, some of the regional maritime services experiencing problems with EF boats are more capable than Costa Rica's. If these other users are having problems, we expect that the SNGC would as well; and

-- Our ODR's own survey of current SNGC capabilities, which highlight the challenges of keeping high-maintenance boats such as EF in service.

12. (SBU) ACTION REQUESTS: Post understands that Merida Initiative maritime interdiction assistance is likely to come from FMF funding, since INCLE Merida funds were cut.

-- Please advise if INCLE funding for refurbishing existing SNGC vessels, as we have requested since 2007 (Ref A), is now completely out of the question.

-- Please also advise why FMF funding could not be used for the refurbishment and acquisition package Post originally suggested for Merida, and which has been included, up to this point, in Merida planning.

Post very strongly believes that the challenges presented by operating and maintaining EF boats would hobble USG maritime

counternarcotics efforts in Costa Rica. In our view, one size does not fit all. We strongly urge that other options be carefully considered (e.g., SPE-LE boats, Ref B), before the USG presents the GOCR (and this Post) with what appears to be an Enduring Friendship fait accompli. We invite other embassies in the region to comment on their experiences with EF boats. END SUMMARY AND ACTION REQUESTS.

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USCG SURVEY AND POST INPUT

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¶3. (SBU) From March 24-28, a U.S. Coast Guard Maritime Assessment team conducted a survey of the SNGC. The assessment focused on Maritime Law Enforcement, SNGC operations, engineering and preventative maintenance, training, and legal authorities. Although not yet issued, the draft report highlights problems with EF boats for Costa Rica as follows:

BEGIN QUOTE: These high speed, high performance (Enduring Friendship) boats require extensive maintenance hours, both electronically and mechanically. They also require a significant amount of technical coxswain training for high speed maneuvering. Moreover, they do not provide an appropriate platform to conduct the primary SNGC missions. END QUOTE.

¶4. (SBU) One of the practical considerations for interceptor boats is the ability to safely board vessels without causing damage to either the boarding vessel or the vessel being boarded. EF boats have rigid hulls that increase the

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likelihood of damage in high seas during boarding operations. Options, such as U.S. Coast Guard Safe boats, negate that possibility with foam-filled hulls that are similar to inflatables but without the risk of being punctured and losing air. This soft "fender" capability greatly reduces the risk of damage.

¶5. (SBU) Post acknowledges that Safe boats may also be maintenance intensive, and we would certainly welcome suggestions for other craft that are more basic and simpler to operate and maintain, but we firmly believe that this type of soft-sided vessel would be an overall better fit for the SNGC than EF units. They would provide the interceptor capability while maximizing safety factors for all involved in boarding operations. We understand that one option under consideration is to modify EF boats, by retrofitting rubber side rails, to minimize boarding damage. We believe that such modifications, even if seemingly cost-effective and potentially available quickly, would not make the EF boats significantly less maintenance-intensive or easier to operate for the SNGC.

¶6. (SBU) Post's ODR office reports that some other regional navies or coast guards have had maintenance problems with EF boats, including the Dominican Republic and Panama. We understand that all the Panamanian EF boats are inoperable at the moment, for example, due to maintenance problems. If so, we urge that these problems be taken into account before supplying EF boats for all users in the region. If other, in some cases more capable, users have difficulties operating EF boats, we expect the same would happen in Costa Rica. We welcome input from posts with EF assets: have these boats been a prudent and effective acquisition for your host nations?

¶7. (SBU) Given these reasons, we strongly believe that Enduring Friendship boats are not/not the best choice for Costa Rica. We therefore do not/not recommend their purchase, but strongly urge that other options be considered (such as USCG Safe boats or similar).

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REVIEW OF SECURITY REQUIREMENTS

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18. (SBU) We stand by our earlier recommendations (Ref A) of what the SNGC needs most, based on GOCR input and our own 2007 assessment:

A) FY2008 MERIDA INITIATIVE SUPPLEMENTAL (\$1.975 million total): Refit and refurbish the inoperable SNGC 65-foot patrol boat in Limon (\$900K); modernize all electronics on two 82-foot patrol boats (\$175K); buy two new interceptors (\$600K); refit four existing 25-foot Eduardono-type "go-fast" patrol boats (\$300K). This would leave the SNGC with two new and seven improved maritime assets for CN operations.

Although we understand that Congressional and funding realities require adjustment to these plans, the most generous alternative under discussion in the inter-agency process now would provide just two EF boats (and supporting equipment) to the SNGC, with none of the refurbishment support for the older boats, and at a higher cost. We do not understand how such a "trade down" from nine new/improved assets to just two (at a higher cost) serves GOCR, USG (or US taxpayer) interests.

B) FY 2009 MERIDA INITIATIVE REQUEST (\$2.035 million total): Refit and refurbish the two 82-foot patrol boats that would have received the electronics package in FY08 (\$1.6M); buy one new interceptor (\$300K); install FLIR on three air surveillance aircraft (\$135K).

C) FY2010 MERIDA INITIATIVE REQUEST (\$2.8 million total): Refit inoperable SNGC 105-foot patrol boat (\$2.5M); buy one new interceptor (\$300K). We would modify the FY09 and FY10 requests based on the final decision for FY08. If INCLE funding for boat refurbishment is out of the question for Merida FY08, then we strongly urge that these requirements be factored into Merida FY09.

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COMMENT

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19. (SBU) As per Refs. B-C, Costa Rica's Ministry of Public Security has consistently told us of their most important priorities, which are mainly fixing the SNGC and receiving police professionalization training and new police equipment.

The GOCR has supported the goals of the Merida Initiative as well, especially with their valued input at the January SICA-based Merida input meeting in El Salvador (Ref E). We should respond by providing what the SNGC needs and what it can use, not an off-the-shelf package that is inappropriate for the SNGC's capabilities. This would be like giving a 15-year a Ferrari.

CIANCHETTE